

**Falkirk Council Empty Homes Plan
2014-2019**

Introduction

Falkirk's Empty Homes Plan 2014-2019, sets out clear objectives and an action plan to reduce the number of private sector empty homes, thus increasing the number of properties available and tackling the blight associated with these properties.

Reducing the number of empty private properties is seen as a priority by the Council and is part of Outcome 1 of the Local Housing Strategy (LHS) which is "*Best use is made of the existing and new affordable housing stock to address local needs*". There are two actions within the LHS which relate to Empty Homes and they are;

- Participate in the Scottish Government/ Shelter initiative on empty homes
- Develop an Empty Homes Plan

Falkirk Council is situated in the centre of Scotland. The population at the time of the 2011 census was estimated to be 156,000¹. The housing stock consists of around 70,134 dwellings of which 68% are owner occupied and 5% are in the private rented sector². There are around 1121 private sector empty properties in the Falkirk area which is 1.6% of the total stock. This is not just a problem within Falkirk but Scotland wide, with around 23,000 properties empty nationally³.

The Empty Homes Agency in England has estimated that the cost of refurbishing an empty home is between £6,000-£25,000. The average cost of a new build property is between £120,000-£160,000. The infrastructure and local services are already in place when bringing an empty home back into use. Empty Homes cannot solve housing supply issues alone, but they can be part of a holistic solution to provide local affordable housing and to regenerate communities.

Through this 5 year Plan we aim to bring 150 empty properties back into use. This plan sets out how the Council will work with owners of empty homes and with local communities to make the most of the existing housing supply lying dormant in our neighbourhoods in the form of empty homes.

¹ National Records of Scotland

² Falkirk Council All Tenure House Conditions Survey 2009

³ Scottish Government statistics

Policy Context

National

Central to the relationship between the Scottish Government and local authorities has been the creation of Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs), which indicate how national policies will be delivered in each local authority area. There are a number of national outcomes that have links to the Empty Homes Plan and they are;

- We have strong, resilient and supportive communities where people take responsibility for their own actions and how they affect others.
- We value and enjoy our built and natural environment and protect it and enhance it for future generations.
- We reduce the local and global environmental impact of our consumption and production.

The Scottish Government's policy paper "Homes Fit for the 21st Century" sets out the Scottish Government's vision for housing. One of the essential elements of the policy is "to supplement new supply by making better use of existing stock by increasing the use of empty homes"⁴.

Awareness of the problems associated with empty properties is higher on the political agenda than at any other time. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership exists to help councils and their partners pursue work to bring private sector empty homes back into use. The project is funded by the Scottish Government and housed by Shelter Scotland. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership provides support for councils to develop policies and processes that will bring private sector empty homes back into use. This includes working closely with local council Empty Homes Officers. Falkirk Council has established strong links with the Scottish Homes Partnership through membership of the Forth Valley Empty Homes Project and engagement with the Partnership's training and networking services.

New Council Tax Powers

From 1 April 2013 new legislative changes were put in place to allow local authorities the discretionary power to remove the empty property discount or set a council tax increase of 100% on certain properties which have been empty for one year or more. This provision only applies to long-term unoccupied properties and not second homes.

Empty Homes Loan Fund

The Scottish Government are keen to encourage owners of empty homes to bring these back into use as affordable housing and made available £4.5 million in the form of an Empty Homes Loan Fund. In recognition of the housing pressures facing rural areas, £2 million of the fund was targeted at renovating empty homes in rural areas. The aim of the fund is to support a range of projects to renovate empty homes

⁴ Homes Fit for the 21st Century: The Scottish Government's Strategy and Action Plan for Housing in the Next Decade: 2011-2020

and make them available as affordable housing. Seventeen projects have been approved for funding one of which was Falkirk.

Local

Falkirk Community Planning Partnership is required to develop a Single Outcome Agreement (SOA), under the terms of the joint 'Statement of Ambition' issued by the Scottish Government and the Confederation of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) in 2012.

The Falkirk SOA has been structured around the national themes referenced in the guidance. There is one local outcome that has links to the Empty Homes Plan and that is;

- Our area will be a fairer and more equal place to live

The Local Housing Strategy is the main over-arching housing strategy for the council. The vision for housing in the Council area over the next five years is - **Homes for Now; Homes for the Future**. This Vision recognises that there is a need to increase the supply of housing to meet current needs and also to improve the condition of the existing housing stock so that it can continue to play a useful role in meeting local need; however, it also recognises that whatever is done now will have an impact on both the environment and the quality of life of individuals and communities for many years to come. This is extremely relevant in relation to empty homes as bringing empty properties back into use can meet current needs and also improve the condition of the existing stock which will have an impact on the environment and quality of life of individuals.

Within the LHS, six outcomes have been identified that provide a strategic direction for the local authority and its partners for improving housing conditions and in addressing housing and related support needs for the following five year period. Renovating empty properties to bring them back into use fits into 2 LHS Outcomes and they are;

- Outcome 1 - Best use is made of the existing and new affordable housing to address local needs and also
- Outcome 5 - The condition and sustainability of housing is improved and measures put in place to address fuel poverty

The LHS also identified a number of actions in relation to empty homes and they include;

- Participate in the Scottish Government/ Shelter initiative re empty homes.
- Develop an Empty Homes Plan

The Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA) indicates an annual average shortfall of 233 units over a 10 years⁵. This informed the supply targets set in the LHS of 100 new build affordable units and 133 of making best use of existing stock. One of the ways that best use can be made of existing stock is by bringing empty homes back into use.

⁵ Falkirk Council Housing Need and Demand Assessment 2011

The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) which is an appendix to the LHS identifies the likely significant environmental effects of the strategy and indicates that reducing the number of empty homes will have a positive environmental impact as it is making best use of material assets.

The Housing Supply Targets paper which was an appendix to the LHS identifies a number of recommendations in order to gain more information on empty properties and they includes;

- Regularly recording information on empty properties and the reasons why they are empty
- Based on the above developing information and advice materials for the owners of empty properties which may assist them to bring their property back into use, including details of private renting initiatives, repair and improvement grants etc.
- The above information to be made available to owners when they claim a discount on their Council Tax for an empty property.

Until more information is available on why homes are empty, it was recommended that the supply target for bringing empty homes back into use was set low at 1 per year.

As indicated in an action within the LHS, the Council was keen to participate in the Shelter initiative re Empty Homes. The Forth Valley Empty Homes Project is a shared service project which began in April 2013 and covers Falkirk, Stirling and Clackmannanshire Council. Shelter Scotland employs one Regional Empty Homes Officer covering the Forth Valley area. The Empty Homes officer is working with owners and other services within the three Council areas to find the best ways to bring empty homes back into use. As of 1/4/2014 Falkirk and Stirling Council are part of the shared service project. The Council has also employed a Private Sector Officer (Empty Homes) who works alongside the regional empty homes officer.

Who benefits from bringing empty properties back into use

Economic

Occupied homes generate more income from council tax revenues. This means that more money can be invested in local services for local people.

An empty home with boarded up windows and doors, overgrown gardens and accumulations of rubbish (fly tipping) can indirectly affect the marketability and value of neighbouring properties. The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors and a study by Hometrack in 2003 both estimate that empty homes can devalue neighbouring homes by as much as 18%.

An empty home can become damp which may cause expensive damage to the main fabric of the building. In addition it may also pose a direct risk of damage to adjoining properties through dampness and infestation.

Empty properties are at greater risk of being targeted in respect of anti-social and criminal behaviour, and so can be costly and difficult to insure.

The owner can receive capital if the property is sold and rental income and reduced outgoings if it is rented out.

Empty homes can attract more serious criminal activity, including arson, squatting, vandalism and drug dealing which cause blight on neighbourhoods and tie up the resources of emergency services and the local authority.

Social

Potential to provide affordable housing for local people

Assist in creating sustainable communities by enhancing the local environment.

Bringing an empty home back into use will reduce the opportunities for vandalism, fly tipping and antisocial behaviour.

The longer a property is left empty and unattended the more difficult it can be to prevent unauthorised entry.

Continued reduction and prevention of homelessness by increasing the effective housing supply.

Increased range and availability of rental properties for PSL.

Improved stock condition

Promoting well managed and maintained private sector housing will enable a better standard of living

Assistance in reviving rundown areas and improvement of communities, which can consequently be a further catalyst for wider regeneration by building property market confidence.

Delivering the Plan through key objectives

Plan Objectives

- Develop and improve the empty homes database.
- Provide clear and effective routes to bring long-term empty homes back into use.
- Raise awareness of Empty Homes in the Falkirk area
- Address long term empty properties that are in disrepair

Objective 1: Develop and improve the empty homes database

The empty homes database has been developed over the last year. The primary source for information about empty homes is council tax records. Across the UK this is seen as the first place to go to begin to build a local database. The main reason for this is that all councils collect information from householders to determine the amount of council tax that should be paid by them. Councils also discount council tax for vacant properties, which is noted in the Council Tax Register. The information collected in the Council Tax Register therefore should include the name and address of the council tax payer and the date that an empty property discount came into effect.

Section 157 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 commenced on 11th October 2011 and is now in force. As a result any officer in a council who has been given responsibility for empty homes work should be able to contact their colleagues in council tax to obtain the information they need on the addresses, owners and the length of time empty of properties listed as vacant on the council tax records.

As vacant dwelling council tax data is the single largest source of data for officers developing an empty homes database, a good relationship with council tax colleagues is essential. Reports are received from council tax colleagues every six months on properties that have been empty for six or more months. The empty homes officer also has read only access to council tax records so that properties can be checked to see if they are still empty before sending out correspondence. The database also contains information on properties identified as empty through the national reporting website and also from Council members and members of the public contacting the council.

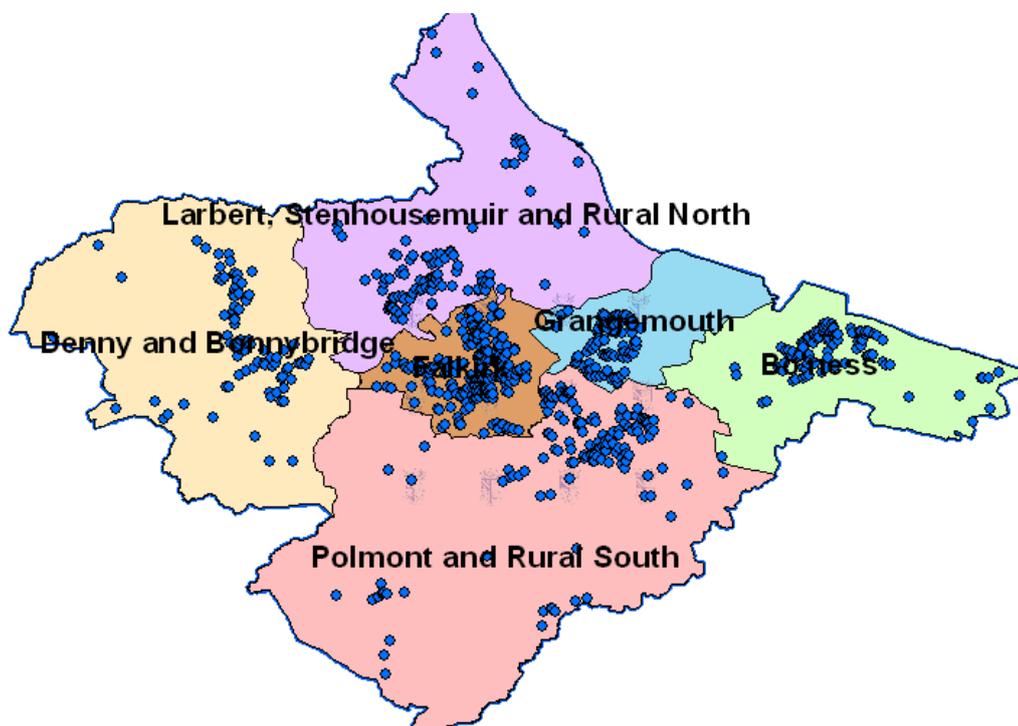
A survey is sent to the owner of every property empty for longer than 6 months to identify the reasons for the property being empty and any advice and assistance that the Council can provide to help bring the property back into use. This is initially how the Council tries to engage with empty home owners.

The regional empty homes officer engages with owners which are seen as “quick wins”, these are properties that have not been empty for long and are more likely to be brought back into use quicker. The private sector officer works with owners of properties that have been empty for longer, are more likely to need refurbishment work and are causing issues within the local community.

It is intended to target properties based on the priorities highlighted in the Local Housing Strategy. To determine which properties should be targeted first, a system has been introduced that identifies properties with the highest priority. These are based on the following indicators;

- Location – areas of highest need from the HNDA
- Property size – smaller properties due to welfare reforms
- Funding opportunities
- Time empty
- Number of complaints/condition of property

Figure 1: Number of long term empty properties in Falkirk Council



Source: Council Tax records, national reporting website, reports from the local community

Table 1 shows that as at 12th September 2013 there were an estimated 1121 long term empty properties in the Falkirk Council area, representing 1.6% of the total stock. The majority of the empty properties are located in the Falkirk housing market area at 35% of all empty properties, the Denny/Bonnybridge area at 10% has the least amount of empty properties.

Long term empty properties are properties that have been empty for six months or more. Council tax records have long been the best source of the data given that most empty properties are identifiable by an exemption code granted to the owner from the date the property became empty. Although council tax records change continuously and they are out of date very quickly, they provide a useful snapshot of the situation and the various exemption codes help explain why properties are empty as exemplified by Table 1.

Table 1 shows that the majority of properties are long term empty properties at 54%, i.e. properties that have been empty for more than 6 months. Second homes are also included in the figure as the long term empty homes discount only applies to unfurnished properties therefore some furnished empty properties may be getting a second homes discount, 34% of the properties are second homes.

Table 1: Long term empty properties by discount code

Discount Code	No.	%
Deceased/probate	23	2%
In Care/Hospital	65	6%
Empty for 6+ months	604	54%
Repossessed	25	2%
Second Home	383	34%
Trust	21	2%
Total	1121	100%

Source: Council Tax records, national reporting website, reports from the local community

Empty Homes Survey

The Council has devised a survey that is sent to all empty home owners once information is received from council tax colleagues that the property is empty for longer than six months. The survey is how the council instigates engagement with the owner of an empty property. Completing and returning the survey indicates that the owner is open to engagement and gives a starting point for discussions with the empty homes officer. It also provides other contact details, which makes it easier for the empty homes officer to contact the owner to provide information and advice. Contact with the owner is recorded on the empty homes database as is information on leaflets provided and reasons why the property is empty.

There have been 2206 surveys sent out to owners of empty properties and so far 583 surveys have been returned with an overall response rate of 21%.

Survey	Number Sent	Number Responded	Response Rate
1st Survey – April 2013	850	232	27%
2 nd Survey - August 2013	357	89	25%
1 st Survey - September 2013	453	163	36%
2 nd Survey - January 2014	195	35	18%
3 rd Survey - January 2014	164	26	9%
1 st Survey – June 2014	98	17	17%
Overall Response	2206	583	21%

Objective 2: Provide clear and effective routes to bring long-term empty homes back into use.

The Council's primary approach in tackling the issue of empty properties, is to work with the owners to encourage them to bring the property back into use voluntarily.

The reasons why people leave a property empty can vary enormously. Many are unable to sell their property because of the economic downturn and are reluctant to rent it out. Sometimes an owner is in residential care and has expectations of returning or a property may be the subject of probate or a legal dispute. Whatever the reason for the property being empty the Empty Homes Officer will contact the owner to outline the options available for their empty property, providing information that may help them in deciding what to do.

There are a number of leaflets that are available and have been developed for the local area and they include;

- Matchmaker Scheme
- Selling your Home at Auction
- Selling your Empty Home: Property Buying Companies
- Renting your Empty Home
- Renovating your Empty Home VAT Discounts for 2 years Empty
- Renovating your Empty Home VAT Discounts for 10 years Empty
- Renovating your Empty Property General Information
- Keeping your Empty Home Safe and Secure
- Home Improvement Discounts for Empty Home Owners
- Valuation and Home Report
- Estate Agent and Selling Tips
- General Empty Homes leaflet
- Falkirk Council Buy Back leaflet
- Falkirk Council Rent Deposit leaflet

These leaflets allow the empty homes officer to quickly provide tailored information to more owners and begin an active dialogue which is the starting point to influencing an empty homes owner to bring their property back into use.

Options Available to owners

There are a number of schemes run by the Council which may help an owner of an empty property get it back into use.

Matchmaker Scheme

The Matchmaker Scheme has been developed to assist owners considering selling their properties and for buyers specifically looking to buy an empty home to register an interest. The council holds a list of potential buyers and sellers. When the Empty Homes Officer spots a 'match' between an empty home and a buyer's requirements, the empty home owner and the buyer will receive each other's details to follow-up. The Property Matchmaker is not an estate agency, and all negotiations and sales processes take place between the seller and buyer.

Empty Homes Loan Fund

Falkirk Council received £100,000 from the Scottish Government to provide interest free loans to owners of private properties to have renovation work carried out so that their empty property can be brought into use as affordable housing. These loans are available in 2013-2015. Loans will be available to pay for works needed to bring properties up to at least the Repairing Standard and enable properties to be ready for occupation. The properties will be used by the Council for Private Sector Leasing for a minimum of 5 years. Loans will be limited to approximately £10,000 per home, however, there may be some flexibility on this. The loan repayment will be deducted from the income the owner will receive from Private Sector Leasing. Priority will be given to 1 and 2 bedroom properties because of welfare reforms and properties that are within areas of demand for Private Sector Leasing. At the moment there are a couple of owners the Council is working with to identify if this is one of the options that can be used to bring their property back into use.

Private Sector Leasing Scheme

Private Sector Leasing is a mechanism for a local authority to lease properties from the private rented sector. Properties leased in this way are commonly used by a local authority to fulfill their legal obligation to provide temporary accommodation to individuals following a homeless assessment. The council then sub-let these properties through an Occupancy Agreement. The Council would seek to procure accommodation from private sector landlords by entering into a minimum 3 year lease. This is an attractive option for landlords as they receive a payment even when the property is empty

Deposit Scheme

A deposit guarantee helps people to access the private rented sector who do not have a cash deposit, by providing a written guarantee to the landlord for their deposit. Anyone can apply for the scheme and they will be accepted if they can sustain a tenancy, subject to satisfactory assessment and references. Falkirk Council can provide a time limited guarantee to a private landlord for the deposit. This allows the tenant to pay the deposit to the landlord in smaller, more manageable instalments, over a period of up to 1 year. Provided the tenant leaves the property in a satisfactory condition, they will get the deposit they have paid back at the end of the tenancy if they decide to move on. If the landlord wishes to claim any of the deposit at the end of the tenancy, one of the national deposit schemes will make an independent decision as to whether the landlord's claim is legitimate.

Objective 3: Raise awareness of empty properties in the Falkirk area

It is appreciated that there is a need to raise awareness of issues and problems associated with long-term empty property issues and provide more publicity about the plan and our approach to tackling empty homes.

Through raising awareness of the issues of empty properties and encouraging home owners to think about the future of their empty properties the Council will seek to ensure that home owners make decisions leading to the re-use of the property rather than leaving them empty.

Council Website

An Empty Homes page has been set up on the Council's web site with information on the different options available to owners of empty properties. There is also a link to report an empty property through the national Report an Empty Property website. It is important that the website is kept up to date with the latest incentive schemes and contact details of Falkirk's empty homes staff.

Role of Council Members

Councillors have links with the community and their ability to publicise this issue is invaluable. Council members have been made aware of the work being undertaken by the empty homes officer and have been encouraged to report empty properties within their ward. They can help maintain a high profile for the Empty Homes Plan.

Landlord Forum

Professional and private landlords are key players in ensuring private sector properties are re-occupied. Their active engagement will therefore be encouraged through the Council's Private Sector team. The empty homes officer attends the bi-annual landlord forum meetings with updates on e.g. the Matchmaker Scheme, Empty Homes Loan Fund.

The Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network

This Group brings a wealth of experience and expertise which also draws on good practice and lessons learned from similar work in England and Wales. This exchange of good practice is beneficial to all local authorities involved.

Community Councils

Community Councils have strong links to the local community and are knowledgeable on a range of issues which affect that community. It is important that they are aware of the work being undertaken by the empty homes officer as they may be able to provide information on empty properties that are not receiving an empty homes discount. An email will be sent to each of the community councils to provide them with the contact details of the empty homes officer so that empty properties in that area can be reported.

Local Media

The local media is another tool that can be used to increase awareness of the help available to empty home owners. The Empty Homes Officer was interviewed by a local radio station to raise awareness of the team and the help and advice available to owners of empty properties to help bring them back into use.

Advertising Boards/Posters

Making as many people aware of the help available and the work being undertaken is very important. Advertising boards have been used to highlight properties that have been brought back into use to raise awareness of the team. A poster has also been designed and has been distributed to local housing offices, libraries, community centres etc. to increase awareness.



Other Council Services

Ensuring staff in other services within the Council are aware of the Empty Homes team and the advice and information they provide is vital so they can then signpost empty home owners to the team. The team work closely with the Council Tax team and environmental health and they are in regular contact with housing offices and planning.

Shelter PR Team

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is housed by Shelter and as Falkirk Council is part of a shared service project Shelter have produced Press releases on e.g. The Matchmaker Scheme.

Objective 4: Address long term empty properties that are in disrepair

Incentives paired with the expectation of enforcement can make a difference in engaging owners to eventually bring their empty home back into use. Scotland does not have the same enforcement tools as England's empty dwelling management orders but there are some enforcement measures that can be used.

The action plan highlights the intention to develop policies and procedures for addressing the issue of long term empty properties that fall into disrepair. The policies and procedures will identify the circumstances where enforcement action is appropriate and best value for the Council. It is the action of last resort once every other option has been exhausted. It is important that owners are made aware that the Council can use these enforcement powers if the owner refuses to engage and makes no attempt to bring their home back into use.

There are three main enforcement powers available to Scottish Councils and they are;

- Vacant dwelling council tax increase powers
- Works Notices
- Compulsory Purchase

Vacant dwelling Council Tax Increase Powers

As of April 2013, Scottish Local Authorities have the powers to remove existing vacant dwelling council tax discounts and charge up to a 100% increase in council tax on empty homeowners whose properties have been empty for a year or more. There are exceptions, including those who are actively marketing their property for rent or sale. At the moment Falkirk Council has decided not to increase the council tax charge on empty homes but instead the empty homes officers will work with the owner to provide advice and support to try and bring the property back into use.

Works Notices

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 introduced a number of powers. One of these was the power for local authorities to issue work notices on the owner of a property. The local authority has the power to serve a notice on an owner requiring them to repair the property whether or not it is in a housing renewal area. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 also allows councils to carry out works where an owner defaults on the work notice. A charge is then placed on the property so the council can recover its expenses.

Compulsory Purchase

Local authorities have a number of powers that allow them to buy property through compulsory purchase with the approval of Scottish Ministers. The council has to be able to justify acquiring an empty property where there appears to be no other prospect of it being brought back into residential use. However, it should be satisfied that it has first done everything that it reasonably can to encourage the owner to restore the property to full occupation.

Key Achievements and Developments

Tackling empty homes within the Falkirk area is relatively new as the team have only been together since April and June 2013. Achievements to date include:

- The appointment of a Regional Empty Homes Officer in April and a Private Sector Officer whose main remit is empty homes in June.
- Active participation in and attendance at the Scottish Empty Homes Best Practice Group, this provides the opportunity to discuss empty homes issues and share best practice.
- External funding of £100,000 has been secured from the Scottish Government's Empty Homes Loan Fund. This scheme offers interest free loans to owners of empty properties to bring them back into use as affordable housing for a minimum of 5 years.
- The Council has developed an empty homes database which is supported by the Council tax database.
- Approximately £32,000 council tax accrued as a result of the above properties coming back into use
- The development and updating of an Empty Homes page on the Council's website which includes a link to the national reporting page for empty properties. There have been 3,146 hits on the Council's web page in 2013-2014.
- The production of a suite of leaflets for empty property owners, exploring the options for returning their empty home back into use.
- The production of a questionnaire to be sent to the owner of each property empty for longer than 6 months.
- As of June 2014, 62 long term empty properties have been brought back into use directly.
- The introduction of a Matchmaker Scheme between Falkirk, Stirling and Clackmannanshire Council. There are 53 buyers and 38 owners who have applied to the scheme.
- The team are currently working with around 250 owners.
- The Council won the Outstanding Project or Service Special Mention award at the Empty Homes Conference in November 2013. The regional Empty Homes officer delivered a presentation at the conference on "Thinking outside the box"
- The regional Empty Homes officer is now involved in training new Empty Homes officers through job shadowing.

Case studies

In the nine months the empty homes team has been together 62 homes have been brought back into use. Some properties have required extensive engagement with the owner to identify the issues which are preventing the property from being brought back into use. Below are examples of the intervention used and advice given to bring some empty properties back into use.

Location: Bo'ness

Empty for: 5.5 years

The owner of this empty home replied to the council's Empty Homes property survey. An initial conversation with the owner determined that the property had been empty for over 5 years. The owner had paid for the entire roof repair, which should have been a communal repair paid for equally by the other units in the building. This left her under great financial strain. The property had previously been marketed for rent but had little interest despite good renovations.

The owner needed a quick solution for her property but could no longer pay estate agent fees. The Empty Homes Officer explained various Falkirk Council schemes such as PSL and Buy Backs. The owner placed her interest in the PSL Scheme but as the Scheme was on hold at the time of her application, other options for the property had to be considered.

The Matchmaker Scheme was then brought to the owner's attention and she signed up. After this, she asked if there was any other way she could advertise her property without cost and the Empty Homes Officer suggested advertising independently through an online site to reduce costs. The owner phoned in the next few days to say that she had put an advertisement on a free online site. Concerned about the owners safety the Empty Homes Officer advised that she always take someone else with her when conducting house viewings, told her not to let people in the property if she felt uncomfortable and offered help in dealing with potential buyers.

The Empty Homes Officer also provided assistance pursuing a new communal repair issue affecting the communal staircase. Addressing this issue has involved speaking to several other departments to collate a list of all owners in the tenement, gain a copy of the Title Deeds and carry out a general inspection of what work is required to bring the staircase back up to a suitable standard. The owner was able to tell viewers of the property that the staircase repair was moving forward and believes that this helped in keeping people interested in the property.

In August the owner informed the Empty Homes Officer that one of the viewers had placed an offer on the property and by September the owner got back in touch to confirm the sale had gone through. The owner expressed how grateful she was to have had so much help and had felt more confident in dealing with her empty property after discussing different options as she knew she had someone to ask when she got stuck. The owner's relief in finally having the burden of the empty property removed was mentioned and was clearly evident when speaking to her.

Location: Shieldhill
Empty for: 2.5 years

The Empty Homes Officer (EHO) received an email from the Owner through the generic empty homes email address towards the end of January 2014. The owner made a general enquiry about an empty property he owned, providing only the address, and asked what help the Empty Homes Project could offer in dealing with the property.

The EHO responded with an email giving a general outline of what help may be available depending on the circumstances of the property and encouraged the owner to phone to discuss the issues.

The owner replied saying that he lived in Australia and had done for the past 40 years. The property had belonged to his Mother who passed away and he inherited it. A niece of his had tenanted the property for a while but she moved down to England a few years ago and it had been vacant since with his neighbours caring for it. He stated he had no intention to return to Scotland so there was no need for him to keep the flat but understood there were repairs needed.

At first he was interested in trying to co-ordinate some repairs so expressed interest in the Home Improvement Discounts. These were sent on and the EHO outlined that she would look over quotes for any works and try and advise where possible. The owner responded with contact details of his neighbour and said the EHO could organise a visit to the property for their opinion on whether or not it was worth carrying out repairs.

The EHO carried out an external inspection on the property. The property was a ground floor flat and it was apparent from a distance that the roof was in poor condition and the external render was in worse condition. The window frames were also allowing damp to penetrate the building.

The amount of work needed on the property was fairly substantial so the EHO explained to the owner that it would be difficult to co-ordinate contractors from Australia. She recommended that he hire a Project Manager to co-ordinate works if he was to choose to progress as many contractors would need to be involved.

The owner said he knew the roof needed a lot of work and so asked for a list of roofing companies that may be able to undertake it which the EHO passed on. A list of Gardeners was also provided to the Owner so that he could organise tidying up the garden for the spring and summer months. This was taken from the local Trusty Trades website and the EHO advised the owner to take some time and look at some of the other contractors as they may be useful for some of the other jobs.

The EHO explained there was still the option of selling the property as it was, perhaps through trying the Matchmaker Scheme first as in this instance a Home Report was not required and the owner could gauge interest.

The owner registered with the Matchmaker Scheme the 14th February and the EHO sent out details of the property to Buyers who matched the criteria. Unfortunately, there appeared to be little interest. She sent what little correspondence from the Matchmaker to the owner as well as some information on Auction Houses and the Falkirk Council Buy Back Scheme.

The EHO checked the ownership of the upper flat to see if a communal repair could be an option for the roof. The upper flat was in fact a Council property with works scheduled to be carried out on the block under the Housing Improvement Programme.

The EHO approached the Buy Back Team with details of the property and asked if the property would be of interest should it go up for sale. They said that if the property had a valid Home Report and was up for sale then they could at least capture it for review. The owner realised at this point he would have to invest in a Home Report and I provided a list of local companies that could complete this.

Within 2 days, the owner had picked a firm to do his Home Report and had arranged a survey. He asked for a list of the Auction Houses as well as anything else he would have to provide for the Buy Back Scheme. After receiving the Home Report, the EHO passed on all the appropriate information to the Buy Back team.

The Buy Back team progressed with their procedures and confirmed that they would take the property onto Stage 1 review. In the mean time, the EHO helped the owner with questions on Auctions.

The property then progressed on to stage 2 of the Buy Back procedures and an offer was placed on the property, under the condition he en-list a solicitor to deal with the affairs.

A verbal offer was accepted on the 1st April 2014 with the owner confirming he would provide details of a solicitor to set up the appropriate actions as he lived overseas. The missives completed with little trouble and the keys exchanged on 16th May 2014.

Location: Stenhousemuir

Empty for: 2 years 4 months

This property was first brought to the attention of the Empty Homes Officer (EHO) via the Private Sector Housing Team within Falkirk Council in early November 2013. They had received complaints from neighbours and the local Councillor regarding the condition of the property, but had been unable to engage with the owner.

The owner had previously been sent a letter and survey as part of the Forth Valley Empty Homes Project, but had failed to return the survey. The EHO managed to make contact with the owner, who now lived in England. The owner confirmed that he had owned the property for some time, but had lost interest in the property as he had been refused planning permission to build a small bungalow in the rear garden of the property.

The EHO explained to the owner that the property was in poor condition and in urgent need of attention. They discussed what help, advice and support the EHO could offer and the owner confirmed that, if the EHO could find him a buyer, he would happily sell the property. The Matchmaker Scheme was discussed and the owner subsequently registered for the scheme.

Two matches were made with possible buyers via the Matchmaker Scheme.

The owner contacted the EHO in late January 2014 to confirm that a verbal offer had been accepted from one of the buyers matched with him through the Matchmaker

Scheme and hopefully the sale would be completed by late February/early March 2014.

The EHO caught up with the owner on 5th March 2014 and he confirmed the sale would be completed on 11th March 2014.

The owner was delighted and relieved to have the property sold. He was very complimentary regarding how the EHO had been able to provide a quick and easy solution for the property, as he did not live close by.

The EHO also liaised with the Council Tax Department regarding outstanding council tax arrears and they have made contact with the owner and are confident that the debt will be paid.

Location: Stenhousemuir

Empty for: 14 months

The owner returned the empty home survey in September 2013. The property had been up for sale for some time with no success.

The Empty Homes Officer(EHO) noted that the property was an ex- local authority property in a high demand area. Although it was advertised as a 3 bedroom house, the EHO was aware from local knowledge of this type of stock that this property's 3rd bedroom was quite a small room and Falkirk Council had in the past classed this type of property as a 2 bedroom when allocating this style of property. The significance of this was that 2 bed properties are of interest to the council's Buy Back Scheme but as the property had been advertised as 3 bed it had not been brought to their attention.

The EHO spoke to the Buy Back team and advised them of the discrepancy. They made the necessary enquiries and had it confirmed that Falkirk Council would class this property as a 2 bed and not 3 bed as advertised.

The Buy Back team therefore went through their process to gather more information about the property, including a survey. This was followed in due course by an offer to the owner which was accepted in October 2013. The owner thanked the EHO for her intervention as the property had been up for sale for quite some time and he was relieved to get it sold.

Falkirk Council's offer to buy the property was accepted in October 2013 and an entry date has been set for December 2013. The property will be used to provide mainstream council accommodation.

Performance monitoring

There are no national performance indicators for Empty Homes. There are a number of indicators which are collated into a quarterly performance newsletter for the Strategy and Private Sector team. This newsletter is available on the council intranet. The following indicators on empty homes are collated for the newsletter;

- The number of properties brought back into use directly and indirectly.
- The number of owners the empty homes officers are working with
- Information leaflets sent to owners
- Amount of council tax accrued
- The number of Matchmaker Scheme applicants

The graphs below show the performance for 2013-2014.

Table 3: Number of empty properties brought back into use 2013-2014

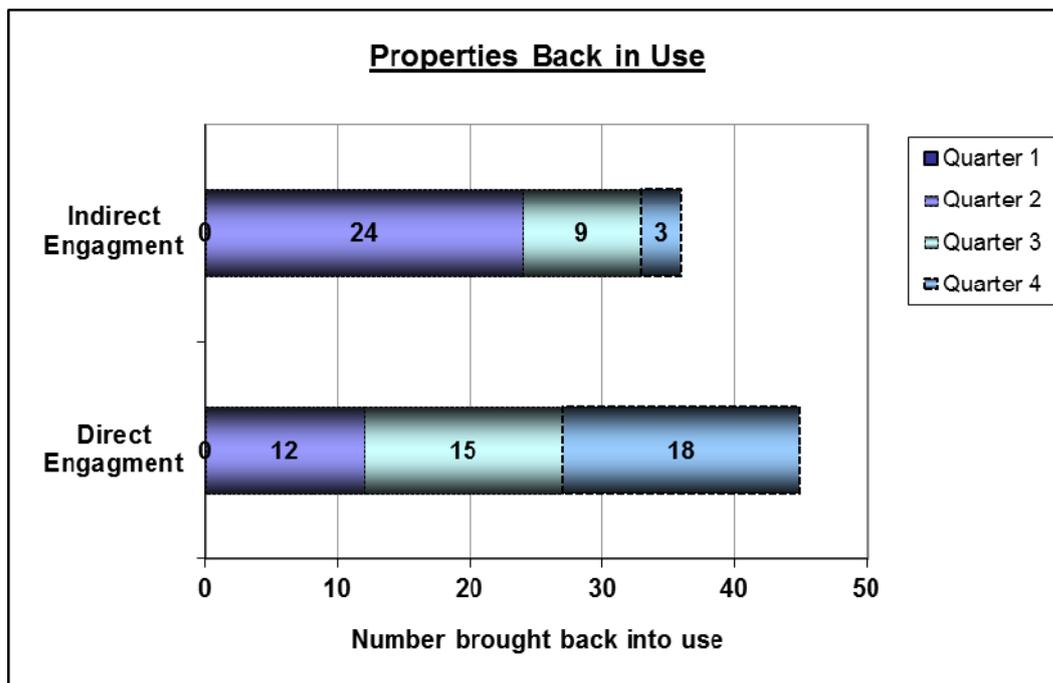


Table 4: Number of owners of empty properties engaging with staff 2013-2014

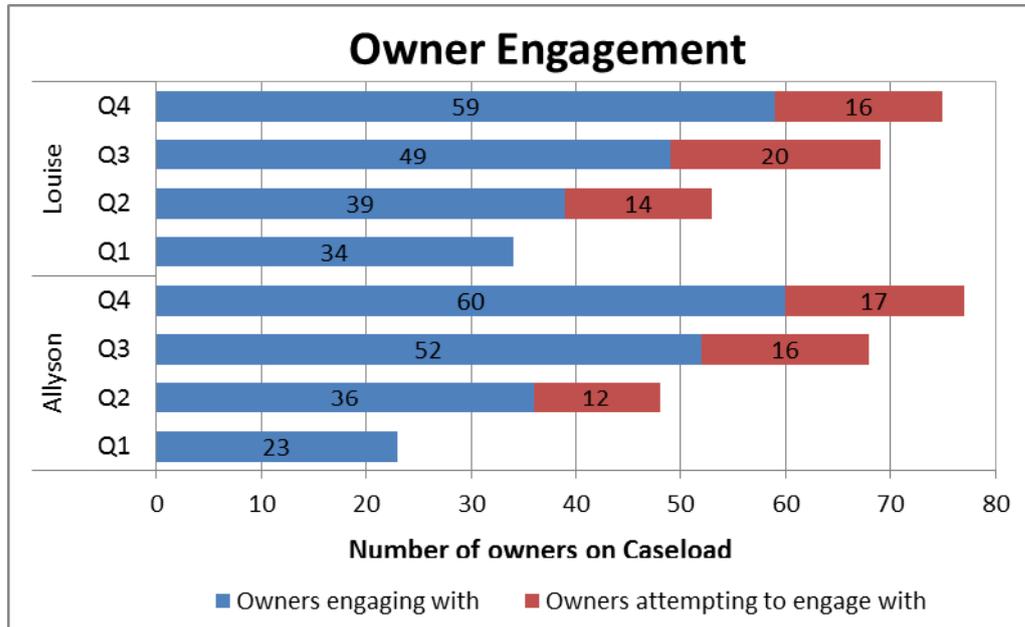


Table 5: An estimate of the amount of council tax accrued by the empty homes team 2013-2014



Table 6: Number of owners and buyers applying to the Matchmaker Scheme 2013-2014

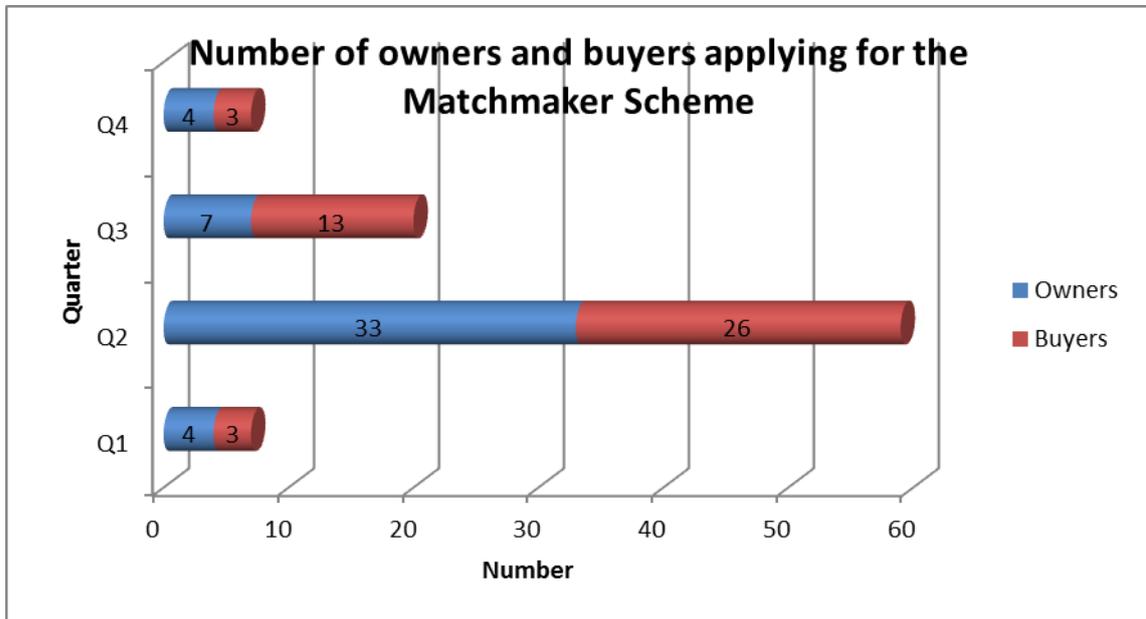
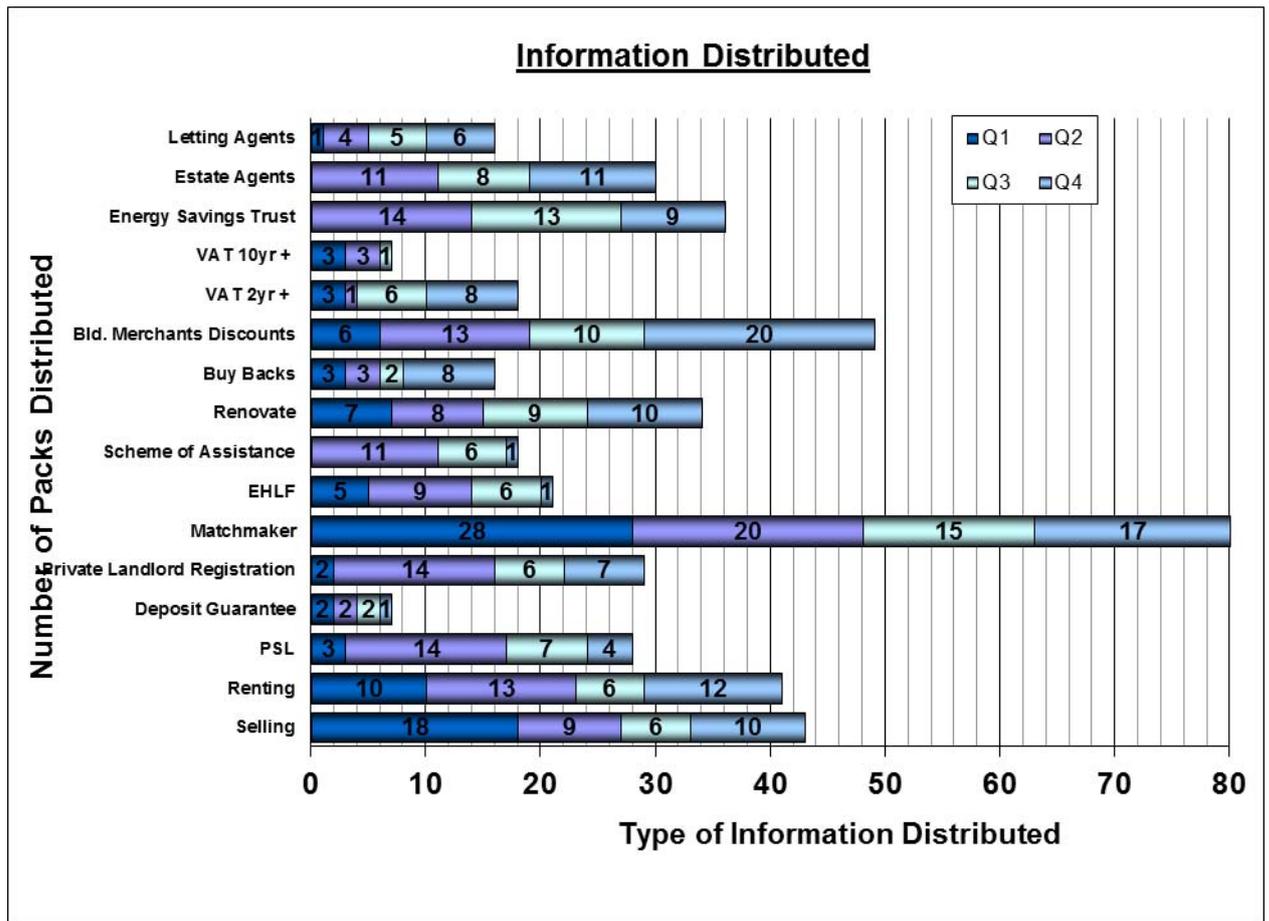


Table 7: Information distributed to owners of empty properties 2013-2014



The annual target for the number of homes returned to use is 30 which reflects the Council's commitment to bringing higher numbers of the Council's long-term homes back into use.

As part of the Empty Homes Plan there are a number of performance indicators that will be looked at on an annual basis and will be reported through the annual Local Housing Strategy Update. Table 2 below highlights the indicators.

Measure	Baseline 2012-13	Target
The number of empty properties brought back into use	0	30 for 2012-2013 and then Increase by 10% each year
The number of owners engaged with through 6 month contact	0	20% of those contacted

Action Plan

Objective	Action	Timescale	Resources	Responsibility
Develop and improve the empty homes database.	Arrange for Council tax to provide a report with new properties empty for longer than 6 months, twice a year	Every 6 months in Feb and Aug	Existing staff	Senior Strategy Officer Revenues Manager
	Establish contact with each owner of long term empty properties through the empty homes survey.	Within a month of new data being received	Existing staff	Empty Homes Officer
	Ensure Ct records are checked using CT Lite before sending 2 nd survey	Ongoing	Existing staff	Empty Homes Officer
	Send a 2 nd letter, 3 months after 1 st survey to owners who have not responded to initial survey	If no response from owner, 3 months after initial survey sent	Existing staff	Empty Homes Officer
	Map empty properties on to GIS and identify any "Hotspots".	May 2014	Existing staff	Senior Strategy Officer
	Incorporate referrals and intelligence from the community regarding empty properties.	Ongoing	Existing staff	Empty Homes Officer

Raise awareness of Empty Homes in the Falkirk area	Establish an Empty Homes Working Group which includes staff from other services to work collaboratively on empty homes and hold bi-annual meetings.	May 2013	Existing staff	Empty Homes officer
	Use local media to promote the work undertaken by the empty homes officer.	Every quarter	Existing staff	Empty Homes Officer
	Continue to research and share good practise with other local authorities.	Ongoing	Existing staff	Empty Homes Officer
Provide clear and effective routes to bring long-term empty homes back into use	Produce an empty homes leaflet and circulate widely to council offices and One Stop Shops	November 2013		Empty Homes Officer
	Ensure the Empty Homes leaflet is sent out to owners who apply for an empty homes discount	Ongoing		Revenues manager
	Look into providing training for empty home owners on becoming a	February 2015		Private Sector team Co-ordinator

	landlord.			
	30 properties to be brought back into use each year.	31 st March of each year	Existing staff	Empty Homes officer
	Consider potential funding for incentivising owners through grant or loans to help bring empty homes back into use.	Feb 2015	Existing staff	Empty Homes Officer
	Engage with all owners of empty properties in "hotspots" identified using GIS.	August 2014	Existing staff	Empty Homes officer
	Promote Council schemes such as PSL, Deposit Scheme and Buy-Back Scheme to owners of empty homes.	Ongoing	Existing staff	Empty Homes Officer
Address long term empty properties that are in disrepair	Work with other departments within the council in order to gain a better understanding of the property e.g. environmental health, private sector team.	Ongoing	Existing staff	Empty Homes Officer
	Work on producing a procedure for	March 2015	Existing staff	Senior Strategy Officer

	identifying empty properties that may need enforcement action.			
	Identify the different types of enforcement action available and the costs.	November 2015	Existing staff	Senior Strategy Officer/Empty Homes Officer
	Set up a short-term	August 2015	Existing staff	Senior Strategy
	working group to look at communal repairs and an Enforcement Policy for empty homes.			Officer
	Work with other services in the Council to produce a Policy for using enforcement action and CPO for empty homes.	March 2016	Existing staff	

	Consider using money from the Scheme of Assistance to ensure communal repairs are undertaken to get empty homes back into use.	December 2016	Existing staff	Senior Private Sector Officer Senior Strategy Officer
	Research the help available to owners who suffer from mental health issues	January 2016		

